



FIGURE 3.5 Social Class Structure in the United States Children are socialized in the social class of their parents, establishing their “life chances.”

Source: Based on Gilbert, D. (2011). *The American class structure in an age of growing inequality* (8th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge/Sage, p. 13.

between rich and poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013). See Figure 3.5 for a distribution of social classes in the United States.

3-5a Social Class Differences

Sometimes, socioeconomic status (SES) is assumed to be related to ethnicity. However, studies have found that SES actually exerts more influence on socialization than does race (Lareau, 2002; Patterson & Hastings, 2007). For example, Lareau (2002) found both white and black middle-class parents made deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children’s cognitive and social development; whereas both white and black lower-class parents viewed children’s development as spontaneously unfolding as long as they were loved and cared for. Thus, different social classes (see Table 3.1 for descriptions) have different aims and methods of socialization, which, in turn, lead to different developmental outcomes for children, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Upper Class

In upper-class families, the child is generally regarded as the carrier of the family’s name, its heritage, and its status. The family is able to bear the maximum costs of child rearing (material goods, private schooling, setting up in business or career). Socializing children in upper-class families to be responsible and to achieve is a challenge when such children already “have everything.” Pressures to conform to family standards come not only from the nuclear family, but also from the extended family (even the dead relatives) as well: “What would Grandfather Smith say?” Upper-class families often employ in-home caregivers. Studies have found that in Los Angeles and New York many of the caregivers hired by upper-class families are poor women with little formal education who immigrated from

How does socioeconomic status influence socialization?

Table 3.1 Social Class Descriptions

The following descriptions apply to the majority of people in a given socioeconomic class, but not to every person in the class (Gilbert, 2011; Macionis, 2009).

Upper Class	<p>Inherited wealth, family tradition of social prominence extending back several generations Authority patterns—emphasis placed on extended family (often either patriarchal or matriarchal) Preparation for adult roles—appropriate child rearing for status, formal schooling for high-status occupations (medicine, law, or business), generally attend private schools and prestigious private colleges</p>
Middle Class	<p>Composed of business executives and professionals (upper-middle class), and salespeople, small-business owners, contractors, craftspeople, farmers Earned status by achievement (education and/or hard work) Authority patterns—emphasis placed on nuclear family (ties still maintained to extended family), egalitarian Preparation for adult roles—high value placed on achievement, respectability, and harmonious interpersonal relationships; education and ability to get along with others considered essential to adult success</p>
Lower Class	<p>Generally composed of semiskilled and unskilled workers Authority patterns—emphasis placed on extended family (close ties with relatives are maintained), patriarchal patterns more common (except where father is absent), distinction between male and female roles Preparation for adult roles—emphasis on respect for elders and importance of survival (class most affected by economic fluctuations); many experience being in debt, being laid off, and/or being on welfare; children expected to help the family rather than further their own education (some don't complete high school)</p>
Underclass	<p>Differs from other classes in degree of hopelessness regarding upward mobility (stuck at the bottom of the social structure, perceive little chance of ever escaping from poverty) Composed of female-headed families, homeless, alcoholics, drug users, mentally ill individuals who have been deinstitutionalized, destitute elderly individuals, illegal aliens, rural families from economically depressed areas; those who cannot get an adequate education, job, or housing</p>

developing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Hondagnea-Sotelo, 2007; Wrigley, 1995). Often their values and beliefs about how children should be raised differ from those of the parents who employ them. Even though the parents provide instruction, the life experiences of the caregivers make implementation difficult.

Middle Class

In socializing children, middle-class parents are more likely to use reasoning and non-physical forms of discipline (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Parke & Buriel, 2006). They tend to emphasize conformity to “what people will say” or “how it would look.” Children are usually taught early to look toward the future. (“Eat your vegetables so you’ll grow big and strong,” “When you can use the potty, you’ll be able to wear big-boy pants like Daddy instead of diapers.”) Middle-class parents try to cultivate and foster children’s talents through organized activities (Lareau, 2002).

Middle-class children are exposed to different language and cognitive experiences than are lower-class children. The structure and syntax of language used by the middle and upper classes is far more complex than that used by the lower class. For example, “I’d rather you made less noise, dear” might be what a mother from the middle class would say to her boisterous child, whereas “Shut up!” might be what a mother from the lower class would say (Bernstein, 1971; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002). Concept development

is related to language development in that the use of complex language indicates a more abstract, as opposed to concrete, perception of reality. Thus, the child from a middle-class family learns the abstract meanings of words like *rather* and *less*; the child from a lower-class family gets a simple, concrete message, directly to the point.

Lower Class

Children from lower-class families are often identified in school as slow learners, aggressors, and truants. Studies comparing the relative intelligence of children from high and low SES families show that those from high-status homes score higher on IQ tests and achievement tests than do children from low-status homes (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004). The differences in intellectual, emotional, and social competence are more marked in later childhood and adolescence than in early childhood (Novotney, 2010; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005). Why is this so?

Social class membership begins exerting its influence before birth and continues until death (Conger & Dogan, 2007). Health care and diet of the mother affect the birth of the child. The incidence of birth defects is higher in the lower classes than in the middle and upper classes. Economic pressure and lack of opportunities affect the mental health of the lower-class family, as well as determine socialization practices (Parke & Buriel, 2006). Lower-socioeconomic-status parents have been found to be more dominant, controlling, and punitive than higher-socioeconomic-status parents, who have been found to be more verbal and democratic and to use various techniques. Lack of money prevents lower-social-class parents from using an allowance as a reward. Children from lower-class families often cannot be sent to their rooms as a punishment, because there may be no room they can call their own to which they can be sent. Neither can such children have privileges removed for noncompliance, such as going to the movies, because they do not have those opportunities anyway. Thus, lower-class families frequently use directives and physical punishment for noncompliance, whereas middle- and upper-class families use reasoning and have more options available for reward and punishment (Conger & Dogan, 2007).

Underclass Children

The underclass, in essence, represents a contradiction to the concept that social mobility is available to anyone in America who is willing to work hard enough for it. How the underclass developed and what should be done about it remain debated issues among social scientists and public policymakers. The problems for underclass children include exposure to drugs and AIDS, child abuse, poor housing or homelessness, crime, insufficient health care, inferior education, insufficient child-care programs and other community services, and economic dependency on government (CDE, 2012). The federal government's response since 1996 has been to provide Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) while the parent(s) get job training and learn coping skills to become self-sufficient. Funds are available for intervention programs including parent education and quality child care (to be discussed in Chapters 5 and 10). These programs play a significant role in the developmental outcomes for underclass and lower-class children (Novotney, 2010).



Having too many responsibilities with inadequate resources negatively impacts the present and future opportunities parents and their children.

Tony Freeman/Photo